NAXOS
Historical

# Great Conductors • Toscanini

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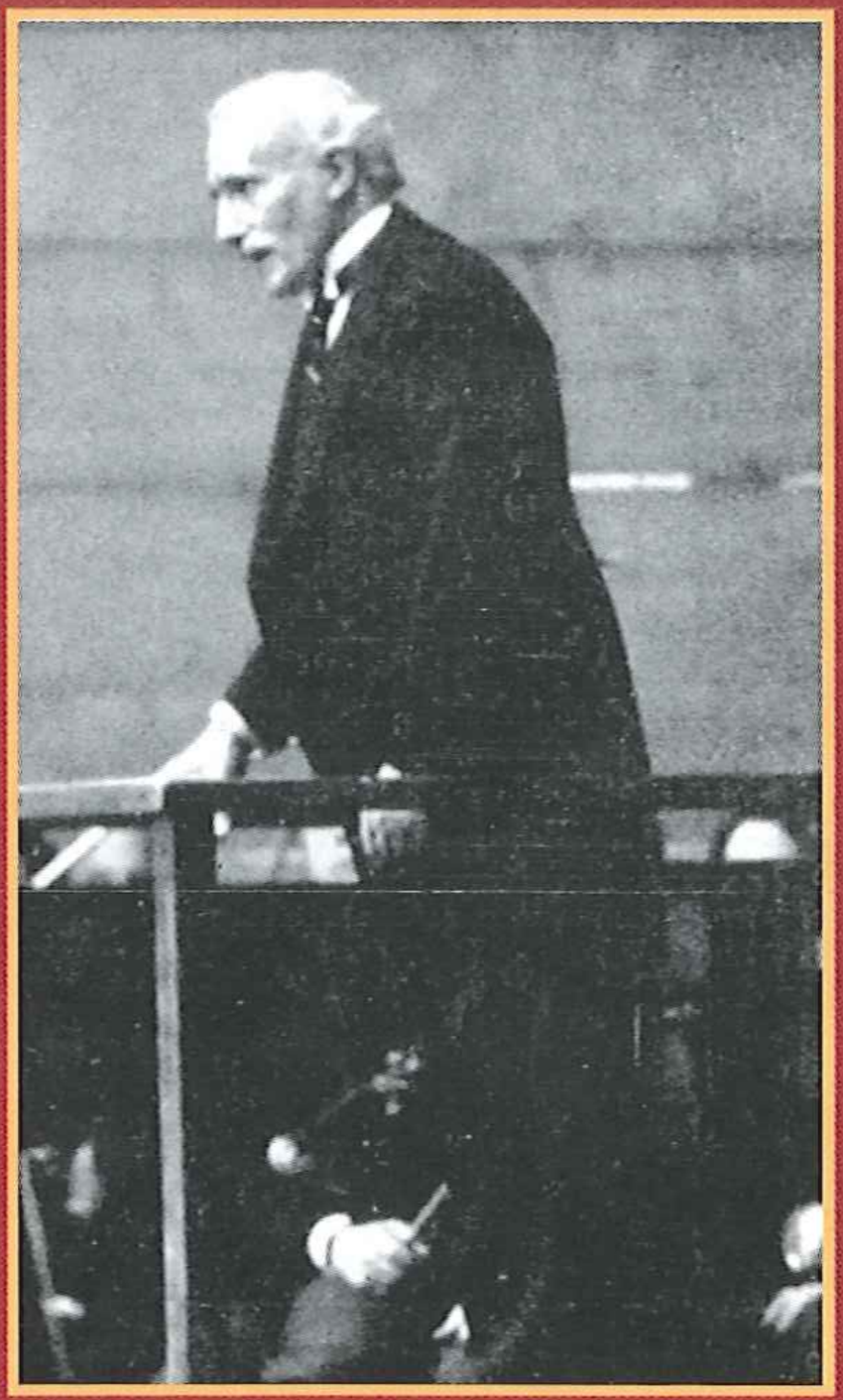

## BEETHOVEN

**Symphony No. 5**
**Symphony No. 7**

**Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York**

## Arturo Toscanini

**Historical Recordings 1933 and 1936**

# Great Conductors: Arturo Toscanini

## Beethoven: Symphonies Nos 5 and 7

These two performances of Beethoven's Symphonies Nos. 5 and 7 represent a great conductor at his best; indeed one of them has claims to be the finest interpretation of any symphony on record. So we are in the realms of myth here, and myths need to be re-examined from time to time. Especially the myth of Arturo Toscanini. For much has happened since he died in New York on 16th January 1957 and if he is the best known conductor of the past, he is also the most elusive. His true nature has been lost behind a blizzard of books, articles, critiques and legends. Endless anecdotes have trivialised him into a monster of the podium, for ever losing his temper or acting unpredictably and intransigently. He has been represented as an anti-intellectual, although he had a penetrating, all-embracing grasp of the music he played. Simply to contemplate the scores he knew by heart, down to the last semi-quaver, is to be humbled by the breadth of his mind. And its depth, because those who worked closely with him on complex operas, choral works and symphonies found that this 'simple Italian musician' knew all the relevant background material. His favourite singers were those who brought the text of what they sang most vividly to life.

What brings us closer to the Maestro than any written (or spoken) word is his recorded legacy. We can never recreate the frisson which his very appearance caused in the opera house or concert hall, nor can we realise the full beauty of the sound his simple, eloquent gestures released to set the air quivering around the ears of his hearers, but through his records we can at least approach an understanding of why he was so important to the generations who heard him conduct in the flesh. We can come to appreciate his still-blazing relevance for the present century. These Beethoven performances document his art when he was still at his peak, in the 1930s, and show him in command of an established orchestra rather than the radio ensemble which was specially created for him not long after this astonishing recording of the Seventh Symphony was made.

Like most conductors of his time Toscanini, born in Parma on 25th March 1867, learnt his trade in the opera house, and as an Italian raised in the twilight of the bel canto era, he brought a knowledge and love of singing to all his musicmaking. In the nineteenth century the human voice was treated with more care and attention than on today's stages. The emphasis was on beauty of tone, articulation and legato rather than weight. If singers in nineteenth-century opera houses were to be heard, orchestras could not play too loudly. Stringed instruments were strung with gut, at a slacker tension than today, and wind and brass instruments were of narrower bore than their modern equivalents, so the texture of the orchestra was more transparent. Singers such as Enrico Caruso, for all that they preserved many principles of bel canto, changed all this, responding to the more complex late Romantic orchestrations they heard coming from the pit at the turn of the twentieth century. As they put more pressure on their tone, orchestras and conductors felt able to produce more noise – and composers could thicken their scoring still further. The increase in popularity of the purely orchestral concert, going hand in hand with the creation of the great symphony orchestras, allowed composers to indulge their fantasies without reference to the human voice.

Yet orchestral standards were abysmal compared with what we expect now. Toscanini played the major rôle in raising those standards, through meticulous rehearsal; and he presided over the period in which the modern orchestra, with its thicker, heavier sound, developed. Yet he never forgot his nineteenth-century origins and his 'sound' retained its luminosity to the end of his long life. While the bass player Koussevitzky and the organist Stokowski built up massive walls of sound on a foundation of twelve double basses, the cellist Toscanini kept his bass lines light and athletic. The inner parts were

treated with unusual respect but were merely equal parts of a balanced string sound. Toscanini knew many string quartets by heart and loved to hear the Busch Quartet rehearse. Not for him the over-emphasis on the cello line that was heard from his fellow cellist Barbirolli; his cello melodies had a singing, sinuous grace.

A major influence on Toscanini was Verdi; he played in the Orchestra of La Scala under the Italian composer and revered him as man and artist. Time and again, as we read Verdi's admonitions to singers and other musicians in his letters, it could be Toscanini writing. In his later years Verdi was appalled by the Romantic rallentandi with which many interpreters distorted his music, and he railed against the liberties they took with his scores. Almost singlehanded, Toscanini campaigned for the sanctity of a composer's work – although even he, as a pragmatic musician, made adroit adjustments here and there. Some of his re-orchestrations were done with the composers' blessings.

One thing Toscanini surely learnt from Verdi was that the impact of a note, or chord, depended on the precision of attack with which it was sounded, rather than its weight. His chords were like whip-cracks – especially in Beethoven – and they generated far more excitement than the sonorous chords of other conductors. These two symphonies furnish other examples of his strengths: his acute judgment of tempo (in the *Seventh*, the Allegretto and the *Scherzo's Trio* were thought fast at the time but he has been proved right); his wonderful sense of rhythm, which buoys up not just quick movements but slow ones and keeps the *Seventh Symphony* dancing lithely along; his humour, which animates the lighter moments; and his exhilarating energy, which turns both finales into triumphant releases of animal power. His phrasing is like that of a great singer – the end of a phrase is comprehended in its beginning. Similarly the end of a movement seems implicit in the way he launches it, so sure is his grasp of symphonic form. His humanity can be heard in the way he phrases the 'question and answer' in the *Andante con moto* of the *Fifth Symphony* – the 'answer' is the epitome of consolation and conciliation, but then Beethoven's music always benefited from Toscanini's idealism, the sense of striving which he brought to all his work and which was peculiarly appropriate to this composer.

So here we have a perfect match of the pieces and the performers, for the musicians of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony play above even their usual exalted standard for Toscanini.

**Tully Potter**

## Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

## Producer's Note

The present disc is the first in a series of five which will present Toscanini's complete commercial recordings with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York (as the New York Philharmonic was known for three decades after its 1928 merger with the New York Symphony). All of the sides recorded by Victor and Brunswick, including works unissued on 78 rpm discs and all published alternate takes, will be included. Some takes have never before appeared on LP or CD transfers. All will be featured together for the first time in a single reissue series.

The two recordings on this disc represent different ways by which RCA Victor attempted to overcome Toscanini's initial aversion to the recording process. After his 1929 sessions, the Maestro indicated his frustration with the stops and starts inherent in taking down four-and-a-half minute long wax master discs, and vowed never to record again. In 1931, Victor recorded two live Toscanini / Philharmonic performances of the Beethoven *Fifth Symphony* onto optical film, transferring a single complete performance to disc. The use of film allowed for longer takes and captured wider frequency and volume ranges than direct recording onto 78 rpm wax discs. (This version will be featured in the fifth volume of this series.)

Undaunted by Toscanini's refusal to approve the results, another attempt to record the work on a film soundtrack was made during the performance of April 9th, 1933. The concert, part of a Beethoven cycle, opened with the *"Pastoral" Symphony*. (This was also recorded but was never transferred to disc, and the films are lost.) The recording was rather closely miked, probably to cut down on audience noise, and little of Carnegie Hall's reverberation can be discerned. As compensation, however, a great deal of presence and detail comes through. Toscanini still withheld his approval; and RCA, for the moment, abandoned its attempts to record him "live". (The recording was transferred from film to disc at different times, with differing numbers of attempts. This accounts for the variation in matrix and take numbers shown in the recording logs.)

For his final recording sessions with the Philharmonic in 1936, Victor worked out a different procedure. Entire symphonic movements or overtures would be recorded straight through on two turntables, without stopping to change wax blanks; however, at certain points predetermined for side breaks, the conductor would have to pause for a few seconds to allow the new side to be started. This solution worked well, and Toscanini recorded most sides in a single take.

The three sides comprising the first movement of the Beethoven *Seventh*, however, required two takes. When Toscanini sailed for Europe at the conclusion of the season, he left the choice of which takes would be issued to a circle of intimates, including Samuel Chotzinoff. Take 1 of the first side was originally issued to go along with the second takes for sides 2 and 3. In 1942, the matrix for the first side was considered sufficiently worn that a replacement was needed. Since there was no "Take 1A" extant for Side 1, RCA was left with two choices: either to dub the first side (which would produce a sonically-compromised result), or to use the only available alternative, Take 2. With the conductor's approval, the latter course was chosen. Toscanini later reportedly claimed that this was his own preferred take; but his admirers have been split between the broadly-paced first version and the tauter second attempt which runs some twenty seconds shorter. Now, for the first time, they have been placed back-to-back in the context of the entire movement, so that modern listeners can make their own choice.

The source for the *Fifth Symphony* was a set of vinyl test pressings. The *Seventh* came from first edition "Red Sea Scroll" discs, except for take 2 of Side 1, which came from a post-war pressing.

*Mark Obert-Thorn*

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COMPACT disc DIGITAL AUDIO

ADD

# BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)

## Symphonies Nos. 5 and 7

Playing Time 76:46

Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York

Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957)

### Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Allegro con brio | 6:18 |
| 2 | Andante con moto | 10:10 |
| 3 | Allegro | 5:03 |
| 4 | Allegro | 9:03 |

Recorded during the performance of 9th April, 1933 in Carnegie Hall, New York, on matrices CS-75698-3, 75699-1, 75700-1, 76201-1, 76202-4, 76203-1, 76217-1, 76218-1 and 76219-1.
Unissued on 78 rpm

### Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | Poco sostenuto - Vivace (originally issued Take 1 for Side 1) | 11:49 |
| 6 | Poco sostenuto - Vivace (substitute Take 2 for Side 1 *) | 11:26 |
| 7 | Allegretto | 8:46 |
| 8 | Presto | 7:13 |
| 9 | Allegro con brio | 6:57 |

Recorded from the 9th-10th April, 1936 in Carnegie Hall, New York, on matrices CS-101200-1 or CS-101200-2 *, 101201-2, 101202-2, 10203-1, 10204-1, 10205-1, 10206-1, 10207-1, 10208-1, 10209-1A.
First issued on Victor 14097/14101 in album M-317

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn



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Cover Photograph: Arturo Toscanini (Private Collection)

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